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Women And The Catholic Church: Turning Point in Pope Francis' Pontificate?

By Karin Heller

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On the day of his election, Pope Francis' first address to Catholics worldwide instilled great hope in all those particularly attached to the reforms initiated with the second Vatican Council. Many were convinced to see in him the beginning of a new age downing for women in the Church.¹ But soon doubts also arose, fostered by an ambiguous discourse. What stoked the doubts was Pope Francis' deep-rooted fear to see women becoming clerics and investing their energy to the detriment of "the woman's irreplaceable role within the family".²

After five years of pontificate, the women question appears as the visible part of an iceberg of which the gigantic and invisible part, remains hidden to the eyes of many. The following analysis is precisely dedicated to this huge invisible part. There is indeed no way to perceive the ambiguity of Pope Francis' deeds and actions in favor of women, if one ignores the profound reasons which hamper whatever substantial reform of the Catholic Church. These reasons are deeply connected to theological options and ecclesiastical structures, which characterize the Roman Catholic Church. There is no doubt about Pope Francis' good will. However, in line with his

¹ See Anne-Marie Pelletier, « Des femmes avec des hommes, avenir de l'Eglise », in *Etudes* 2017/1, 47-56.

² See Pope Francis' address to the participants of the national Congress Sponsored by the Italian Women's Centre, January 25, 2014

(http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/january/documents/papa-francesco_20140125_centro-italiano-femminile.html) and to the International Union of Superiors General, May 12, 2016 (https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160512_uisg.html).

predecessors, he remains prisoner of a clerical system implemented since the Gregorian reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries. This system weighs down whatever good will of reform. Even a pope profoundly attached to necessary transformations, will not change his intellectual and cultural categories of thinking, and realize a shift from a more than a millennia old tradition to a renewed worldview proper to the third millennium, in a couple of years. This statement is particularly true for the Vatican's anthropology, which remains deeply informed by a way of thinking forged throughout the Middle Ages and the implementation of the Council of Trent. To change this anthropology equals a change of Church model, what apparently neither Pope Francis, nor the Catholic Magisterium³ are ready to envision right now. During the pontificates of the popes of the last century, the women question was even more contained within strict limits of the Catholic thought system than in the Middle Ages and the Counter-reformation period. Therefore, one has first to remember the turn the women question took in this context.

The « anti-gender » crusade

1.a. The Unites Nations, origin of a new anthropology

Since the second half of the 20th century, popes and Vatican authorities have put great efforts into writing abundantly “on” and “to” women. On the other side, no document is specifically addressed to men, with the exception of the traditional papal Maundy Thursday letter to the priesthood. Women receive much attention on behalf of the magisterium, while Catholic men, do not seem to need such a special care. In other words, in the mind of the magisterium women are still men's business, contained within the strict limits of women's major role in marriage, family, ethical and moral questions of the Christian life. In today's Church women's voices have for sure a consultative nature, but not a legally binding one, excluded as they are from decision making meetings of the

³ In a large sense, the magisterium compasses all persons – cardinals, bishops, theologians – and all ordinary institutions (the Roman Curia) and extraordinary committees (oecumenical Councils and Roman synods) – that establish together with the pope Church doctrine. In the restricted sense the magisterium is embodied by the pope alone.

magisterium. Church decisions continue to be formulated in writing by men alone, although they apply to women just as to men.

Moreover, the Church documents related to women, do not take heed of the different situations, cultures, and institutions where today's women and men live and develop. They are written in line of a certain Tridentine tradition in defense of Roman Catholic teaching and preservation of worldwide Roman Catholic identity. In doing so, the Magisterium finds itself heavily challenged by the United Nations and their decisions in favor of women. Since its foundation in 1945, the organization of the UN has recognized in the equality of rights between men and women, a fundamental principle for preserving future generations from the scourge of war. Its goal is to establish conditions that maintain international peace by the means of achieving "international co-operation in solving international problems of economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, as well as by "promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion".⁴ This last statement was retaken quite *verbatim* in *Gaudium and Spes* 22, but its application remains limited to Catholics living *in the world*, while Catholic women *in the Church* remain barred from access to all ministries and decision making committees because of their sex.

The two world wars have propelled a great number of women into positions held so far by men. This fact produced an irreversible worldview shift within occidental cultures. From now on, a lasting world peace could not be envisioned and established any more without women. On this basis the UN developed a new anthropology, which escaped whatever control by the Roman Curia. Up to this point in world history the Roman Catholic Church was the only supranational institution, that, in the image of a *mater et magistra*, bestowed her benefits on humankind with the help of countless women, wives, widows, and nuns, subservient to civil, religious and ecclesiastical patriarchy. To reach its goals the UN

⁴ See : Foundation Charter of the United Nations, Preamble and first chapter.
<http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/> (last access March 2019).

established in 1946 a commission on the status of women, mainstay and architect of four world conferences on women between 1975 and 1995. In 2015 the member states adopted 17 sustainable development goals at the horizon of 2030. For the UN “achieving gender equality and women empowerment is integral to each of these goals”,⁵ which respond to the great challenges of our time, be it access to education, economic crises, lack of health care, eradication of violence or climate change. In the mind of the magisterium, however, what prevails, is a preconceived image of « the woman” and the “Catholic family”. This idea is to be preserved and promoted by stigmatizing the evil, which erodes modern societies.

Nevertheless, in 1964, under the pontificate of Pope Paul VI, the Holy See obtained the status of observing member at the UN, without any right of vote at the general assemblies, and therefore, free from any duty to apply its resolutions. But this status allowed the Holy See to take part in the different conferences organized by the UN with the right to vote. Given this privilege, these conferences provided the Holy See with opportunities to develop its proper anthropological views and make its oppositions known to UN resolutions. One of the common examples known by a large public is its firm opposition to demographic limitation, but also others such as “women’s rights”.⁶

1.b. Traps of the «anti-gender » battle

During the years 1975 to 1995, the magisterium elaborated an organized model of human anthropology, with its specific language and vocabulary, as well as its “scientific” support. This model was abundantly promoted through the networks of Catholic movements, religious institutions, pontifical institutes, and the media belonging to the Church. The goal was to promote the “right image” of the “Catholic woman” and “Catholic family” in opposition to women’s revendication for access to ordained ministries,

⁵ See: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs>.

⁶ See : Doris E. Buss, « Robes, Relics and Rights : The Vatican and the Beijing Conference on Women », in : *Social and Legal Studies*. SAGE Publications, London, Vol. 7, 1998, 339-364.

contraception, abortion, divorce and re-marriage, medically-assisted reproduction and other questions related to ethical issues and culture. At the end of the years 1990 all these revendications were combined in what can be designated as an “anti-gender” crusade, which tied the question of women in the Church to the revendication of “marriage for all” and the cause of the LGBTQI community.⁷ It is true that, historically, other categories of human beings saw in the combat of women for more social justice, a forerunner of their own combats, such as the Afro-American civil rights movements or those making their coming out as gender variant people and expressing claims for social recognition. In response to what seemed to many a world getting out of joint, the Roman Catholic Church authorities saw no other solution than to make theological engagement with modernity impossible and to hold fast to a propositional model of Church life.

An important number of Catholics, in line with an education of faithful allegiance to the pope and the magisterium, for whom decisions were binding *ipso facto*, joined in good faith this “anti-gender” crusade. Their adhesion was even more genuine as each black and white thought system is easy to understand, seems to be of common sense, and appeals to the rewarding satisfaction of siding with the “right people”. In many occasions, the « new evangelization », was even transformed into a new *reconquista*, with its uncompromising activists, holding unyielding stances. It deepened the rifts between the Church and today’s world⁸, followed by an unprecedented defection of Catholics in Western societies, personally or indirectly affected by the discrimination of women in the Church, the revendication of rights and freedom for

⁷ See: Sara Garbagnoli et Massimo Prearo, *La croisade « anti-genre » : du Vatican au manifs pour tous*. Ed. Textuel, 2017.

⁸ See the case of an abortion undergone by a nine years old Brazilian girl in 2009, raped by her step father since the age of six. The archbishop of Recife and Olinda, Dom José Cardoso Sobrinho immediately excommunicated the medical staff, responsible for the abortion as well as the mother of the girl. As for the stepfather, there was no ecclesiastical sanction whatsoever.

homosexual couples and other gender variant minorities.⁹

Since the end of the years 1990, this defection went also hand in hand with the public disclosure of the sexual abuse scandal by clergymen from top Vatican officials down to parish priests. It was systematically kept secret and swept under the rug. In 1994, an in depth report established over six years in 23 countries by Sr. Maura O'Donoghue, was meant to alert the Roman authorities about the sexual and spiritual abuse of nuns by Catholic priests¹⁰. It already signaled two major reasons responsible for such a scandal: the problem created by ecclesiastical celibacy and the status of inferiority of women in the Church. A woman religious had to be educated to consider herself as permanently inferior, submissive, obedient, in particular in regard to ecclesiastical authorities. The damages created to the Church by such views started leaking under the pontificate of Benedict XVI and more importantly with the beginning of the #metoo movement and the pontificate of Pope Francis¹¹. These sexual abuse scandals have widely contributed to shattering the unconditional credibility and high esteem enjoyed historically by the clergy.

In this context, Pope Francis' initiative to proclaim an « extraordinary jubilee of mercy » makes sense as it powerfully reaffirms the fact that « when faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy ». ¹² But this written encouragement soon bumped into a problem of application : how can one become a herald of mercy emmeshed as he is in a system that speaks « in the name of the great Catholic family » and

⁹ One can cite the case of German Catholics: between 1990 and 2010 approximately 3,5 million of Catholics made a written statement at their tax office by which they declared to not to belong any more to the Roman Catholic Church. See Internet sources for *Kirchenaustritte in Deutschland*.

¹⁰ Voir : http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm.

¹¹ See the courageous conversation broadcasted on February 20, 2019 by the German International TV *Deutsche Welle* between Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna/Austria and Doris Wagner, a former sexually abused nun. <https://www.dw.com/en/abuse-within-the-catholic-church/av-47584489> .

¹² *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction, 2015, 3.
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html. (last access March 2019).

presents itself as an “expert on humanity », ¹³ while the great Catholic family has no chance to bring her “expertise on humanity” to the tables of decision-making processes, with the exception of those that align anyway with the Roman expectations?

Today, as can be seen in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL)¹⁴, pope Francis’ difficulty is conditioned by the magisterium’s fight for an « ontological difference between men and women », a biological determinism, and a feminism which opposes the « true feminism » the magisterium upholds and defends (AL 52 ; 56). The question remains open as to which point he can and is willing to critique the « anti-gender » theory developed by the Vatican. Up to which point can he and is he also willing to break with a certain way of leading a combat for a cause he probably never studied in depth by himself. It rather puts him into a fragile and incoherent position.¹⁵ There are two essential arguments he does not seem to perceive or does not want to consider. First, the extremely wide-ranging studies on gender theories cannot be narrowed down to a narrow one, always designated by Vatican rhetoric (and Catholic movements against “marriage for all”) as “the theory of gender”. In the magisterium’s mind, the term may relate to the positions of Judith Butler, who represents a very extreme form of feminism, but also varies in her conclusions and voices critiques on behalf of the scholarly guild. She envisions for example the possibility of the discursive dimension of gender¹⁶, which discloses individual

¹³ Address of Pope Paul VI to the UN on October 4, 1965. See: https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651004_united-nations.html (last access March 2019).

¹⁴ The « Joy of Love », apostolic exhortation on love within the family, published on March 19, 2016, following the extraordinary synod on marriage and the family held in Rome in 2014 and 2015.

¹⁵ See Pope Francis’ in-flight press conference on October 2, 2016 from Azerbaijan to Rome. In this conference he reacted negatively to French schoolbooks that propagate “the gender theory” and contribute to an “ideological colonization”. The French education minister qualified Pope Francis statements as “jumping into conclusions” and saw in him a victim of the massif disinformation campaign sustained by Catholic conservative movements. It was rather painful to see Pope Francis basing his discourse on anecdotes he took at face value, and not on sound scientific and academic research.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/october/documents/papa-francesco_20161002_georgia-azerbaijan-conferenza-stampa.html ;

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/angry-french-education-minister-hits-back-at-pope-francis-1.2814988>.

¹⁶ For Butler physical sexual identity is open to whatever is possible. This position questions the essential association between human sexuality considered so far as binary, and its symbolic meaning. In other words, her position separates for example a woman with all her biological constituencies from motherhood. Voir :

freedom to develop one's sexual identity as one sees fit – a position that is far from being held by consensus.¹⁷

Second, studies of gender theories are objects of a wide range of contradictory debates. What unites all of them, is the recognition of two essential facts: first, social inequalities exist between men and women; second, social and cultural roles attributed to each sex is traditionally justified by the existence of a feminine and masculine “nature”, while in reality these roles are social constructs, the source of all kinds of blatant and subtle discrimination. The great majority of gender studies does not negate the sexual constitution of women and men and their vocation to become parents, even though the magisterium very often affirms the contrary, invoking apocalyptic threats for the future of humankind.

Based on the research undertaken in all areas of the human sciences, gender studies also claim the right to recognize other worldwide forms of human sexuality than the rigid and exclusive division into two sexes, male and female. This development led to the legal recognition of a non-binary classification or third gender, followed by the emission of non-binary passports by ever more countries.¹⁸ Therefore, it is difficult, even impossible of living in denial of intersex people or to reduce the number of persons with undetermined gender assignment to extremely rare cases one can forget about. In the next decades more and more people with undetermined sex assignment will make their coming out and will affect more and more parents, siblings, families, and societies, an argument the magisterium is not ready to hear. For now, this development has collided over and over again with the quasi obsessional affirmation of an exclusively binary sexuality of humankind by the Church's magisterium.

As for his biblical interpretations and theological options, pope

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity*.

http://lauragonzalez.com/TC/BUTLER_gender_trouble.pdf.

¹⁷ See for example : Audrey Benoît, *La construction discursive du sexe par le genre : une question matérialiste ?* <https://journals.openedition.org/philonsorbonne/923> (dernier accès juillet 2018).

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_recognition_of_non-binary_gender (dernier accès juillet 2018).

Francis remains mostly dependent on the theology of the body, elaborated by his predecessor John Paul II (AL, 9, 23-24, 29, 52, 68, 82, 251). This theology attributes to women equal dignity with men, but, given their « ontological difference », on which are based their different functions in society, the debates are narrowed down to the questions of specificity, reciprocity and complementarity between men and women (AL 172-177). The theology of the body identifies the nature of women with being mothers, while the nature of men is not said to be fathers. For men it seems to be sufficient to be just men! As for intercourse, it is qualified as conjugal, as long as it is accomplished by a couple in full agreement with the teachings of the Church. This form of « conjugal » intercourse is superior to a mere genital act accomplished by whatever couple not living according to teachings of the magisterium. On a practical level however, this distinction clashes with real life of couples in the Church: when begins the conjugal act in full agreement with the teachings of the magisterium, when does intercourse stop to be merely genital? What happens when a couple married within the Church does not fully adhere to its teachings? How does one handle bad conscience, even spiritual frustration created by a “conjugal act” far away from the ideal set by this theology? What happens when a not desired pregnancy follows another, ends with separation of the couple and divorce, even in couples where the husband is deacon? How can one put into practice this theology when intercourse loses its attractiveness, even becoming a burden – a case *Amoris Laetitia* raises with a certain courage (AL 153-154). Nevertheless, Pope Francis lucidity does not change anything to his discourse, which overtakes the language of John Paul II.

The difficulty he shares with his predecessors, is created by a constriction, that contains the question of women in the Church as much as it can within the limits of family life as well as ethical problems and Christian sexual morals. He has a hard time envisioning this question in its deep relationship with what is at stake in the modern world, and is otherwise so close to his heart,

i.e.: poverty, migration, ecological disaster, economic and exploitation. In addition, his discourse is not informed by a dialogue with human sciences, dealing with the great variety of psychological and social difficulties of sexual life, at a moment of history where in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, the great majority of women holds as an evidence that one is not born a mother, but becomes a mother. Therefore, today, it is not enough to exalt the female condition of virgin, mother and spouse in theological terms, or to want to better women's life by regulating it in a good father's fashion (AL 53-54 ; 155-156).

We live in a world where, one and a half centuries ago, women have started to take their destiny into their own hands. They know how to use the media to defend themselves and rightly make the claim to have their part in the transformation of the world. By doing so they also raised positive awareness in a great number of men. Many of them have started to understand, little by little, that to deny humanness to women, is to dehumanize their own humanness and to dehumanize human societies.¹⁹ In the Church and in the world, men who share in this awareness are still way too rare! By maintaining women at an "ontological distance" to men, pope Francis and the magisterium continue to exclude women as major actors of the solution in response to the immense challenges faced by the Church and today's world. For this reason, the question of women in the Church brings particularly to the fore the problem created by the present Church model.

- **What kind of anthropology for what Church model?**

Right from the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis affirmed his unconditional attachment to the Church model as it exists since the Gregorian reforms. His appointment of a C9 bears witness to this fact as well as *Amoris Laetitia*, where he chooses to make a significant use of declarations emanating from a great variety of

¹⁹ Voir: Richard W. Miller, « Hearing Women's Voices », in *Women and the Shaping of Catholicism*, Liguori, Missouri, 2009, p.7.

Bishops' Conferences. His way of proceeding is clearly in line with the system « clergy-laity » or “teaching and learning Church”. The extraordinary synod on marriage and the family made it already clear that voices of lay persons, and therefore women, were not welcome at the table to the same extent than the voice of the bishops. The presence of a great number of women in the preparations for the synod has certainly altered the outlook of this synod in comparison to the other Roman synods held so far. Nevertheless, one can be dubious as for the real impact created by women's interventions.²⁰ For such a thing to happen, there needs to be above all a redefinition of synods and of the hierarchical and sacramental structure of the Church. Even if a woman, Mary, seems to Pope Francis « more important than the bishops », he is blocked by a fear of a “machismo in a skirt”.²¹ At least two major obstacles do not allow him to engage in a significant reform here. First his Mariology more in line with antique representations of ever virginal mother goddesses and the “eternal feminine” than with a renewed Mariology based on Christ's unique anthropology. Second his visceral fear of a “female machismo”, grounded in his unwavering conviction that “woman has a different make-up than a man.”²²

2.a. Machismo, a sin ignored by the Magisterium

On December 22, 2014, Pope Francis addressed a bold discourse on the fifteen ailments to the Roman Curia. It is significant that among these ailments the pope does not mention the ailment of machismo.²³ How difficult is it not for men to confront their own machismo, when they never experience it on their own. All over the world it is enough to be born a boy and enjoy an *a priori*

²⁰ Voir : Lucetta Scaraffia, *Du dernier rang : Les femmes et l'Eglise*, Salvator, 2016.

²¹ *Evangelii gaudium* « The Joy of the Gospel », 104 ; Interview by Fr. Antonio Spadaro S.J., August 19, 2013. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html (dernier accès juillet 2018).

²² Interview of Pope Francis by Antonio Spadaro S.J., August 19, 2013. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html (last access July 2018).

²³ See : https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html (last access March 2019).

expectation and recognition for being better off than all those not born with a male sex. And when it happens to men to think about changes in favor of women, they are mostly unprepared. Since their childhood indeed, they have been taught not to identify with girls, and to act based on their “natural” superior position, promoted by culture, justified by religious laws, and set in stone by human institutions. But perhaps one of the major victories of machismo is to have persuaded women themselves to support machismo, be it civil or religious, and thus perpetuate the system that favors men over women. There is a general assumption that narrows machismo down to toxic masculinity, a form of sexually aggressive, unemotional, and generally violent male power in all areas of daily life. But there exists a subtle machismo behind demonstrations of respect, good manners and honor, praising and flattering women as being even better than men, but usually only in areas men do not consider compatible with their masculinity. This subtle machismo is socially approved. It presents men as genuinely aware of certain situations of injustice toward women, ready to stand up and take action as long as these actions do not jeopardize their culturally guaranteed superiority within society.

This subtle machismo drives the Church and humankind mostly without being noticed, engrained as it is since childhood years in minds and hearts as part of the perfectly normal human constitution. Pope Francis bears witness to an aggressive machismo, when, after enumerating acts violence women face in this world he makes the following statement, “history is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior”. But what precisely is disturbing in this quote is the term “excesses”, as it leaves the door open for taking subtle machismo for granted. In the same paragraph he certainly recuses to see in female emancipation the origin of today’s problems, claiming forcefully that this argument is not valid, false, untrue, and a form of male chauvinism (*AL*, 54). But subtle machismo goes for him totally unnoticed. Hence the following questions: should all forms of machismo be object of critique? Are there are certain forms of

machismo perfectly acceptable in the Church and cultures worldwide?

***Amoris Laetitia* illustrates very well the problem created by a machismo of good manners. In his comment on *Genesis 2*, pope Francis follows a typical male pattern of hermeneutics, elaborated by thousands of male interpreters and repeated since centuries in multifaceted variations. What strikes one from the outset is the fact that *Genesis 1* is minimized in favor of *Genesis 2*. For Pope Francis « Adam » is a male adult, the first of creation, and not a pluralistic being, an original humankind, that encompasses all human beings, be they male, female or intersex, according to a basic meaning of the Hebrew term *haadam*. He imagines God forming Eve and then hears the man exclaim in amazement, “Yes, this one is just right for me!” (*AL*, 221). The pope’s reading of the text underlines that “man anxiously seeks ‘a helper fit for him’ (vv. 18, 20), capable of alleviating the solitude which he feels amid the animals and the world around him. While the text itself does not mention any “anxiety” on behalf of man, it insists on man’s first spoken words recognizing in the woman his equal, bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh (*Gen 2:24*). There is no place for an evaluation of a woman as one would do for an object of trade or pleasure, followed by an evaluation report saying, “this one is just right for me”. One has to be a woman to notice either the ignorance about woman sharing in the same human nature than man or a nuanced form of contempt for women hidden behind such words. In another passage Pope Francis also imagines God fashioning first a man. God then suddenly “realizes that something essential is lacking” which leads God to form Eve. In this case, the woman is equal to a missing piece within a creation where God forgot something “essential”. Today, what woman cultivating a most basic positive self-understanding would accept such an interpretation?**

***Genesis 2* highlights on the contrary a God who says that it is not good for man to be alone, while man is not feeling or doing anything, and presents God her/himself as the most excellent**

helper in this situation. Read in this context, the theological insight of the passage appears in full light: the woman who is said to be *ezer ke negdo*, or strength corresponding to man, is placed in an amazing proximity with God, who also is an *ezer ke negdo*, a God always turned toward his people throughout history (Ex 18, 4; Dt 33, 7.26.29; Ps 33, 20; 115, 9-11; 121, 2; 124, 8). Both, God and humankind, as well as man and woman, are of equal strength, which founds the reason for which they precisely can prevail at decisive moments of history. Such a vision is rooted in a theology of covenant proper to the New Testament, which affects all areas of human life, be it political, economic, social, familial and religious. The question is therefore to know up to which point extends the capacity of woman to rescue man from his solitude? Is it a solitude that just covers the fact that man cannot produce offspring by himself alone? In this case the woman's capacity to draw man out of his solitude is limited to her roles as mother and spouse, housekeeper and housewife. Or does man's solitude also extend to the exercise of political, economic and religious power in the public square? In this case women are to be present in all domains men usually reserve to themselves, given that it is not good for a society, a country, a nation, and also the Catholic Church when men alone make decisions in place of all the other.

In the following pages, Pope Francis makes a big deal out of masculine and feminine roles, as also envisioned by patriarchal societies: man works outside, while the woman is busy inside the home, according to traditional cultural concepts, while not being in favor of exaggerated rigidity between masculine and feminine roles. (AL, 23-24 ; 28 ; 162 ; 175-177 ; 286). Once more, his position raises the question of the boundaries: where does a certain fluidity stop, where does an overall natural masculine rigidity start, given the biological sexual determinism? What is clear, however, with certainty, is the fact that woman's ontological difference prevails in Pope Francis' mind. His vision of a non-biblical "I-you" relationship between man and woman, outweighs the biblical vision of "two-in-

one-flesh”. This recurrent issue spurs to ask the following question in a blunt way: up to which point is he open to be freed from an apparently inalterable conviction that “woman has a different make-up than man”²⁴ he consciously or unconsciously shares with the great majority of men worldwide?

Undoubtedly, our trend, be we women or men, is to think about ourselves first. Nevertheless, it seems more difficult for men to read texts in a way that includes women’s own viewpoints. Were not men particularly educated to never identify with women? In this perspective, the talk about otherness in men’s mouth can be truly pernicious. Women are usually very lenient to make a big fuzz out of it. Why? The reason is that such language is not in their favor in a world where “the fathers” are the domineering force, and provides them enough justification to ignore women’s views and impose only men’s views as including *ipso facto* the ones of women. And as women, since childhood, have been educated to always hold back, to never critique a man or speak up against one, in particular in public (see *1 Tim 2*, 11-12), everything is all for the best in the best of men’s world. It is in this way that machismo subtly causes its damages by mere speech. The present model of the Church functions based on this subtle machismo. Since centuries clergy used it to transform for example religious institutions for women as a pool for docile maids good for whatever was asked from them²⁵ and keeping on top of that control over their revenues. There exist collective wage agreements for laypersons hired by clergy, but as the employees depend all together on canonical and civil law, women in particular are more often kept in a precarious situation, while laymen have a better chance to be granted a fair pay. Still too often women continue to be the first victims, particularly at the

²⁴ Interview of Pope Francis by Antonio Spadaro S.J., August, 19, 2013. (https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html).

²⁵ See supplement *Women, Church and World*, published by the *Osservatore Romano* on March 2, 2018. The article written by the French journaliste Marie-Lucile Kubacki deals with the discontent of many women religious working in the Vatican: <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/almost-free-work-sisters> (last access March 2019).

moment of retirement, where each year counts.²⁶ To play the game on a canonical and civil level is just another way of exercising subtle machismo. As long as this way of thinking and acting is not consciously recognized as a sin against God, creator of humankind without any distinction of sex, and against the Church, body of Christ, including women, the life of women in the Church is far away from a significant change. The appointment of a consulting counsel, only composed of women at the Pontifical Council of Culture, of a couple of more women, members of the International Theological Commission or of a female under-secretary of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace and the newly established Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, will not change anything to the condition of women in the Church. As laypersons women will always remain subservient to clergymen, owing them their appointments, while clergy alone enjoys the privilege to appoint them, favor the appointment of women deemed to be submissive to men's politically correct views, and to fire the ones that are not pleasing. In other words, the problem is one of a genuine collaboration between men and women, women and men, where mutual understanding, confidence and esteem can grow and create a world of more justice and peace. Such a world will never arise as long as women are considered different from men and excluded from decisions which affect their lives. At this point the huge question is the one to which only men can give an answer: do men really want such a world?

This Church model based on an anthropology where subtle or open machismo is said to be God-willed, leaves it up to women today to make a choice between three options. 1. They persevere in the Church in good faith, unaware up to which point they are victims of this subtle machismo and up to which point they play the game of this Church model; 2. They leave the Church, very often without making any noise, and join Protestant communities open to women in leadership and ordination or they continue to ensure activities in

²⁶ See the ongoing debates between the French Bishops' Conference and government on the status of Church employees. <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Actualite/L-Eglise-et-le-gouvernement-cherchent-un-statut-pour-les-laics- NG -2008-05-28-671745> (dernier accès juillet 2018).

the world giving meaning to their lives, without rejecting their Catholic and Christian roots; 3. They stay fully engaged within the Church looking for ways of transforming the Church from within. This last option puts them, however, in delicate situations, as they are forced to navigate *nolens volens* an all pervasive subtle or affirmed machismo, which makes them particularly vulnerable as for their liberty of speech.

The women and gender friendly transformation of the Catholic Church willed and desired by many women, men and also clergy, depends on a powerful renewed reading of Scripture, Church history and the Church traditions. At this point, the major difficulty of Pope Francis is his good will « to do something for women” without making whatever change to the Church’s so called unanimous and immutable doctrine. Such a stand was very well illustrated by the extraordinary synod on marriage and the family, that never raised the question about the deep connection between Christian marriage and structures of a certain Church model elaborated since the Gregorian reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries. Is there really no connection whatever between the structure “head-body” as taught by the magisterium and the fear of the other as “a rival”? Or is there really no interdependence between Christ and the Church, head and body, body and head, which implies that even Christ cannot always give, but has also to receive, as underlined by Pope Francis for man in relationship with a woman (AL 140 ; 157) ?

2.b. The relationship « Christ-Church » and « men-women »: step stones for a renewed anthropology

Pope Francis is certainly right when he writes, that « each marriage is a kind of ‘salvation history’.” Nevertheless, how difficult is it not to establish bridges between the great mystery “Christ-Church” (Eph 5:33) and the relationship “man-woman”. Clues for doing so are spread all over *Amoris Laetitia*, as the two just highlighted quotes at the end of the previous paragraph. Here are two other examples. He writes, « the greatest mission of two people in love is

to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman. Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity (AL 221).” Such a mission of “helping one another” to become who they truly are, does it not also exist between Christ and the Church? He also writes, « Marriage is also the experience of belonging completely to another person (AL 319).” Such an experience isn’t it made possible also by one’s belonging to Christ through baptismal life?

Instead of exploring in depth questions like these, Pope Francis once more takes the road of the ontological distinction, which keeps Catholic spouses at distance from the real sacramental union between Christ and the Church. He writes « God makes of the two spouses one single existence”. But he apparently does not discover this “single existence” precisely realized, because their marriage is imbedded within the great mystery of the unity between Christ and the Church. Is it his fear of abolishing an ontological difference or a certain incomprehension of this great mystery which spurs him to not confuse the different levels between the spouses one the one hand, and the great mystery on the other? What he sees is that “there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church ...” (AL 121 and 122). The way Pope Francis reads these texts raises some observations on an anthropological level, that could become step stones for a renewed theological anthropology. In what follows the focus will be just on two.

2.b.1. Christ’s anthropology is a unique anthropology

In Pope Francis’ mind the relation between Christ and the Church seems to be of different nature and superior to the relation between men and women. This « ontological otherness » was already a *crux* for the theologians of the first Christian centuries, when challenged to express the particular anthropology created by the Incarnation. For the theologians of these past times, Jesus of Nazareth was not just a boy as other boys born to their parents. Therefore, the second person of Holy Trinity was called « son »,

because Jesus was made flesh and not because he would have come to reveal that God was “male” or should be thought of in terms of masculinity only.

According to Ambrose of Milan, the term *human* has always a sexual connotation. But just as sexual connotation is proper to human nature, it is not of God.²⁷ What distinguishes the three divine persons, are their relations and nothing else. Therefore, the Incarnation of God’s eternal Word and the fact of him having a male sex, cannot introduce into God a whatever division or opposition. For this reason, his humanness cannot be an « ontological otherness », but it is a unique newness Paul says to be a mysterious union of all the baptized in Christ: race, status and sex cannot provide a justification for a division, opposition, or discrimination (Gal 3 :27-28). In Irenaeus of Lyon’s terms, Christ’s humanity is unique insofar as it is pre-lapsarian, meaning before humankind’s fall. While *haadam* indicates the origin of all humankind, without any distinction of status, race or sex, the risen Christ, who recapitulates in him all things (Eph 1, 10) is the realization of this foundational unity.²⁸ Consequently the risen Christ cannot be narrowed down to a man with male genitals in the glory, as his body is the Church, *in via* and *in patria*, or the pilgrim church on earth and the church in heaven.

In the context of the medieval debates about the eucharistic body of Christ, followed by those related to the implementation of ecclesiastical celibacy, Greek philosophical concepts continued to replace ways of thinking based on Scripture still familiar to patristic theologies. This process consistently changed the comprehension of the functions within the Church. Church authorities finished by inventing an « ontological otherness » produced by the imposition of the hands at the moment of episcopal and priestly ordination, a gesture which elevates bishops and priests beyond the condition of

²⁷Ambroise de Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, III, 10, 63.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34043.htm> (last access, July 2018).

²⁸Gustav Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation. A Study of the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 86-87.

the merely baptized.²⁹

Closer to us in time, the fatal weapon of ontological otherness was again used to forge the « iconic argument » according to which only a human being of male sex can act *in persona Christi* when celebrating the Eucharist and the sacrament of penance. As Christ is « the head of his body, the Church » (Col 1, 18), nothing seemed to be more evident than to think of the relation Christ-Church and man-woman according to a hierarchical order, in line with the traditional roles attributed to the sexes by patriarchal systems worldwide. In the years 1975-1995 this kind of thinking was at the origin of a clear rupture in regard to the comprehension of Jesus' sexuality: it became drawn to an exclusively masculine humanity, which founds its prestige and power on male sexuality. Such a new comprehension was introduced by *Inter Insigniores* (1976) and confirmed by *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994). *Inter Insigniores* indeed proclaims for the first time in Church history that “the incarnation of the Word took place according to the male sex” in spite of biblical and patristic traditions which held since more than 1500 years that the Word of God was made human flesh, expression which is inclusive of all humankind, male, female and intersex (Jn 1:14). This affirmation represents an unprecedented change in comparison to Pope Paul VI's letter to Donald Coggan, archbishop of Canterbury, in which the pope still holds the following three reasons for excluding women from the ordination to the ministerial priesthood and episcopal ordination: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church». ³⁰ *Inter Insigniores* made of Jesus' sex a theological argument according to which only

²⁹ See : Y. Congar, *Notes sur la valeur des termes 'ordinare, ordinatio'*, in *La Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, t. 58, 1984, 7-14.

³⁰ See *Inter Insigniores*, Part 5 and *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html , footnote 1.

men can validly receive priestly ordination, making it at the same time an argument of exclusion and division within the Body of Christ, which contradicts Paul's affirmation for whom the relation Christ-Church is a mystery of a realized unity (Eph 5:33).

2.b.2. A renewed hermeneutics of the relationship head-body

Humankind and the unique anthropology of Christ are foundational for expressing the relation head-body, since Paul introduced this metaphor into theological thinking. In light of the Incarnation and the pascal mystery, the new key term in his writings is *allelon* (« one for another », Ga 5, 13. 15. 17. 26; 6: 2 et 4). For Paul, the new baptismal existence in Christ does not abolish the complex identities of Jew, Greek, slave, free man, woman and man, but challenges a lifestyle according to ancient categories, which are determined by the superiority of categories such as Jew/man/male/circumcision or other patriarchal social models. The proper of these models is precisely to draw on the deep cultural association between political, economic and religious power on the one hand and sexual male power on the other.

What makes the Pauline vision so special is the fact that the head/*kephalê* is not presented as more eminent than the heart or the lungs just as the heart and the lungs are not more eminent than the head. But all members depend on one another and live for one another in a vital unity. For the author of the letter to the *Ephesians*, man is head/*kephalê* of his wife and not of his household, even though the household codes in chapter 6 introduce the idea *as if this were the case*. But the *paterfamilias* – in Greek *oikodespotes* or *archon* -, who exercises right of life and death over wife, children and slaves, is not an equivalent of head/*kephalê*. In the community of life established by Christ and the Church, Christ does not exercise his function of head on account of his sex, but of the following two theological affirmations. First, he exercises this function according to the original unity of all humankind in the first *haadam*. Christ is not above this first humankind, but depends on it. Christ could not be Savior and Redeemer without receiving from

humankind a human body and without receiving from Israel an incorporation into a salvation history, long before his incarnation as the eternal word of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Second, he is head as the one who « being in nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped to his own advantage”, but he emptied himself of whatever privilege and power, “taking the very nature of a servant”, by “being made in human likeness” and “becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (*Phil 2, 5-7*). This *kenosis* includes that Jesus did not take a wife for founding a family. He could never imagine for himself a marriage as envisioned by the patriarchal structures of his time. He refused to become the only owner or user of a woman, according to the meaning of marriage in Hebrew culture.³¹ As for a woman she has no power whatever to marry; she can only be given by a father or male relative and taken in marriage by a husband. This kind of marriage was not an option for Christ and led him to give up on exercising power based on his male sexuality and all the prestige and prerogatives it confers in the eyes of the world.

What regulates the communication of life in the unity of Christ and Church, head and body, are the various charisms granted by the Spirit. These charisms are not bestowed upon the members of this body according to distinctions related to status, race or sex. For this reason all the functions of this body, including the function of head, are also open to women, according to the calling of the Spirit. This anthropology based on Pauline and Post-Pauline writings, is powerful, but also provoked rejection, in particular on behalf of men. The long-term response to this women and gender friendly anthropology was the prohibition repeated *ad nauseam* for women to go to the altar³² and the return to the good old social order, where women, children and slaves embraced again the traditional

³¹ In Hebrew the expression *beulat ba'al* designates a married woman (Dt 22: 22) or a woman owned by a *ba'al*/man/husband. The terme *beulat* is a past participle of the verbe « to marry, possess, exercise power over ».

³² Council of Loadicea de Laodicea (ca. 364), Canon 11 and 44; Council of Nîmes (394 or 396) ; Letter of Pope Gelasius (492-496) to the bishops of Southern Italy ; Council of Paris (828); Pseudo-Isidorian decretals (9th century) and more. See: Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women Ordination. Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

ways of being subservient to men. This return is confirmed by the introduction of the domestic codes in the post-pauline writings (*Col* 3, 18-4, 6 ; *Eph* 5, 21-6, 9), while they are absent in the gospels and the letters considered as genuinely Pauline. Household codes stem from the Greco-Roman culture and were adapted to Christian living in an all pervasive, sometimes life-threatening, pagan environment and may have served as a pattern on which the communities drew in their endeavor to institutionalize Christianity. They set the stage for a subtle or Christianized machismo, according to the personality of the men in command decade after decade, century after century. Today, this anthropology is in a deadlock. A way out depends on the capacity to think about what Pope Francis calls « a deep theology of woman » in light of patristic wisdom, that always refused to use Jesus' sexuality as a theological argument for otherness, division, opposition or superiority.

Conclusion

This analysis understands itself as a response to Pope Francis' call to send him « courageous proposals », revealed by the Austrian bishop emeritus Erwin Kräutler.³³ The major purpose of this paper is to underline the urgency to rethink the exercise of magisterial power. To reach this goal at least three things are essential.

First, one cannot envision any more the elaboration of magisterial texts in company of a couple of carefully selected collaborators or in the solitude of an office inside of the Vatican.

Second, given today's development of exegetic and theological research to which many Catholic women have contributed since decades and have brought to the table feminine voices of faith interpreting the Scriptures, one cannot any more be satisfied with a mere literal reading of Scriptural sentences out of context and abandoned to a mere personal and masculine imagination.

Third, the magisterium reached its present juridical dispositions

³³ See : Erwin Kräutler, *Neue Wege*, *Rupertusblatt*, <http://www.kirchen.net/rupertusblatt/aktuelles/news-details/news/neue-wege/#.W1yVbzozblU> (last access July 2018).

through the meditation of Scripture and theological research. But it has also to recognize the limits set to these activities proper to each time period. Consequently, these dispositions can and have to be updated, based on the renewed biblical and theological understandings, new juridical contexts and the signs of time.³⁴

For centuries the Church was thought according to a model forged by the Roman Empire, based on a hierarchical structure and patriarchal legislations. But if the Church is truly the People of God and the body of Christ, the Church is in need of a Constitution stipulating a system of checks and balances, which allows to share magisterial power among pope, bishops, priests, female and male laypersons. To think that the current Church model can be maintained *ad vitam aeternam* is to get stuck in a deadlock. An exit of the actual situation is conditioned on the recognition of equal dignity of women and men, based on the unique anthropology of Christ and not on a binary sex system, which perpetuates sinful sex and gender discrimination and division. If Pope Francis is not willing or prevented from taking a lead in such a reform, Catholics will continue to have three options: waiting for another pope willing and capable of doing the job; living without any hope for a pope and magisterium ever reaching this goal; or leaving the Church.

³⁴ See interview of Sabine Demel, Professor of Canon Law at the University Regensburg. https://rp-online.de/panorama/wissen/alle-getauften-sind-zum-priestertum-geweiht_aid-20275885 (last access July 2018).